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The good and bad

There are a rash of jokes circulating these days built around the good news, bad news concept — even a full collection of good news, bad news stories in a book. In a sense the jokes accurately reflect what's happening in the world at large where the good and the bad inevitably balance one another. But because bad news makes for bigger headlines in the newspapers, the world often seems dominated by the negative.

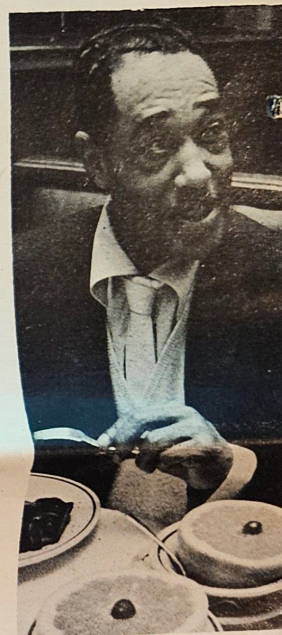
In a magazine publication it sometimes is also easy to get carried away by the negative, but we here at SEPIA have sought to attain some kind of well-proportioned balance by digging out and seeking to accentuate the positive sides of black life in America, too. Certainly our accomplishments in the past score of years, particularly in every area of American life, have been more accelerated than in the century before. Yet we still have so far to go to attain genuine equality under the American system that only by emphasis on the goals ahead as well as the inequalities still so evident, can we hope to speed the march to our goal.

And so the negative emerges in many an issue, and perhaps more so in this issue than usual . . . in a sense as a kind of self-criticism. We refer to our articles on "Racketeers In Race Relations," "Poverty Doctors" and "The Great Dope Wars," all of which expose alarming developments in the black community. In all instances blacks are the victims and in some cases are being exploited by our own people. Perhaps it is coincidental that we have three articles of self-criticism in a single issue, but it is our feeling that every so often we, ourselves, need a reminder of our aspirations, a sensible assessment of our shortcomings.

On the positive side this month we take pride in the much-deserved tribute to Duke Ellington written by Alfred Duckett. Too often we wait until our greats have passed from the scene to honor them. Certainly Duke Ellington needs no special honors from us, but we thought the occasion of his appearance in our home city of Fort Worth would make appropriate our salute.

Next month marks a return appearance in SEPIA of singing star Freda Payne, who was subject of much reader comment when we ran a story on her early this year concerning her preferences in males. Now Freda is appearing in a new movie . . . and in the nude. Writer Bob Lucas, who is not averse to asking questions, asked why she had changed her mind about going "nude."

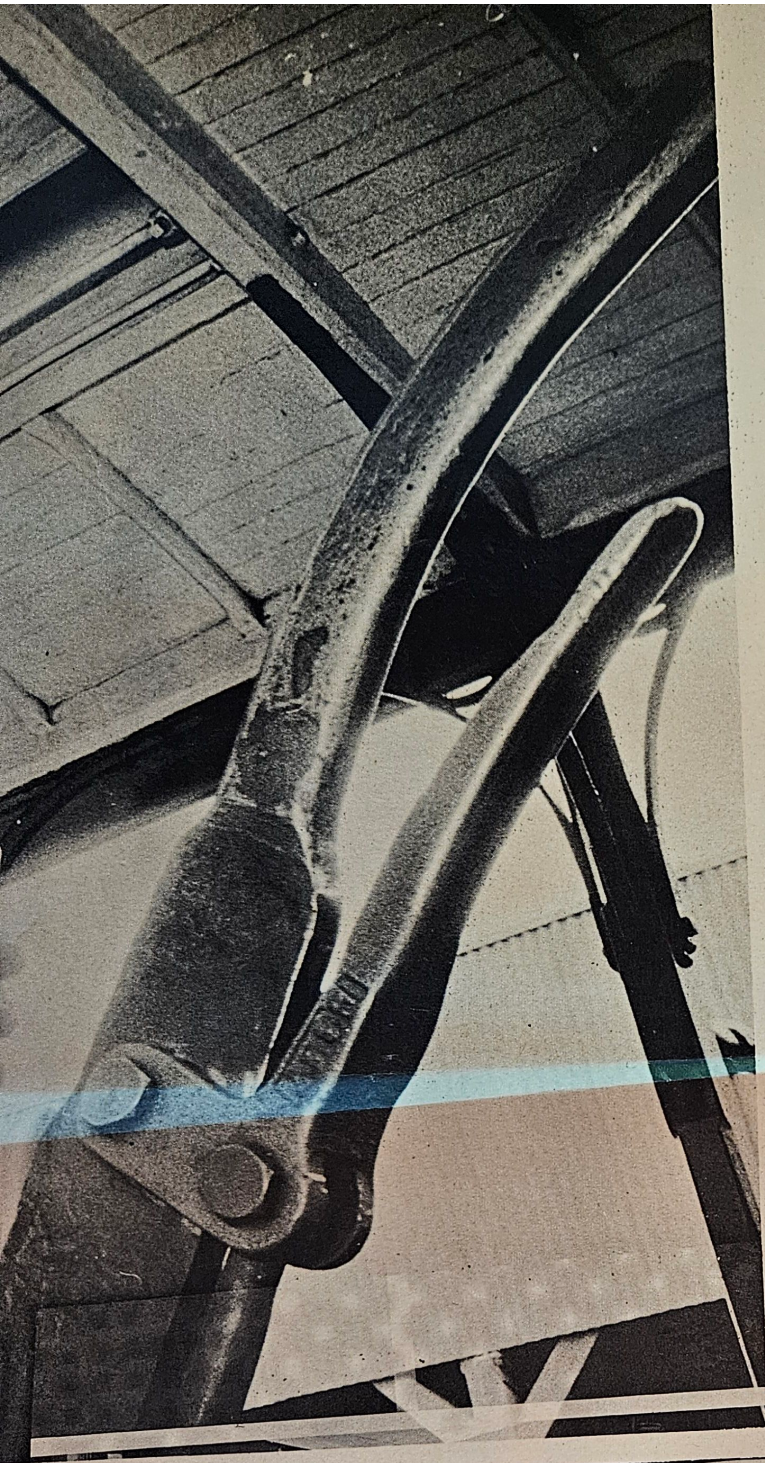
The December issue of SEPIA gives her quite provocative answers.



DUKE



FREDA



Maneuvering intricate series of cable car levers, Joseph W. Nobles (left) is one of 175 grip men who run 36 cars over high hills in San Francisco. Nobles was 1972 winner of annual cable car bell-ringing contest.

Cable Car Pilots

By JOSEPH HORTON

Seen crawling up a hill on the TV screen, a cable car looks like it might have been created by mating an insect and a Toonerville Trolley. That's been the image for millions, thanks to all the television shows and films set in San Francisco in recent years. But what is a cable car?

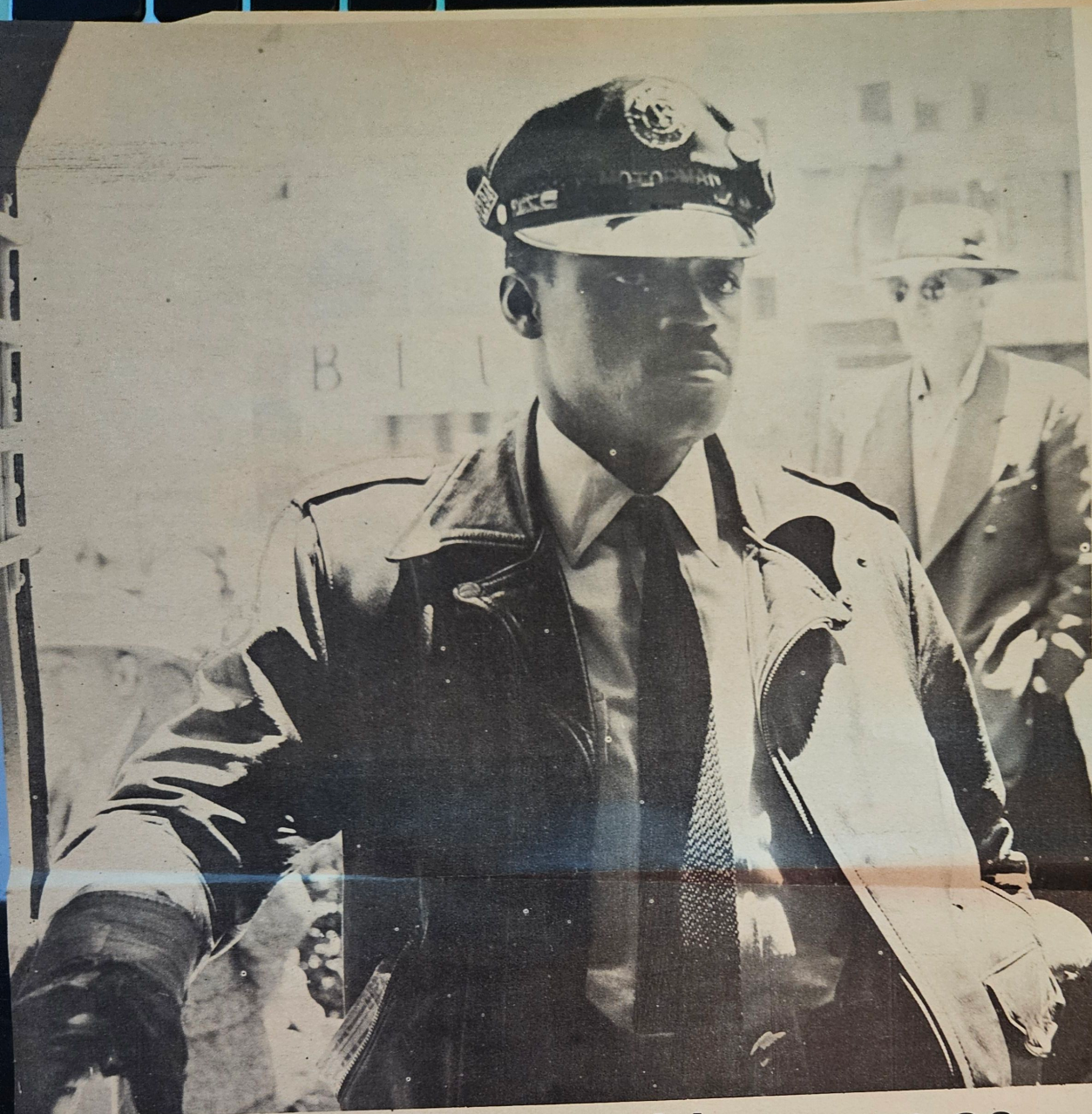
It used to be the major means of transportation in San Francisco. In the Gay 90's, eight private companies operated 20 different runs over 60 miles of track and cable. Now, with only three runs over ten miles, all operated by San Francisco's Municipal Railway, the fleet of 36 cable cars is primarily a tourist attraction, a form of entertainment. Which makes it apt that one of the hottest men in show business today is also the most celebrated alumnus of the cable car system. Once he even did a book about cable cars. That was in 1957, before he became famous, and he was more reticent then. He used the pen name of Melvin Van. Now the name is Melvin Van Peebles, showman-artist extraordinary of screen and stage best known for "Sweetback."

His book written 15 years ago fit into a San Francisco legend. Aside from serving as a vehicle for transportation and/or show business, the cable car is also a mystique. "A cable car," Van Peebles wrote, "is a big heart with people for blood. The people pump on and off . . ." So he titled his book "The Big Heart." With less originality and more embroidery, the cable car mystique was celebrated by the late Lucius Beebe, social snob, gourmet, railroad nut and a man least likely to do the hard physical work of operating a cable car. For Beebe the cable car represented "the spirit of San Francisco," a cable car nosing over a hill was "the quintessential expression of San Francisco's altogether admirable individualism." Put "spirit," "quintessential expression" and "heart" into a semantic blender and you get another word . . . Soul. Which makes another coincidence apt . . . today two out of three of the men who operate cable cars are black. Yet there was a time not too many years back when cable car crews were totally lily-white.

Van Peebles in some respects was typical of the new era, a new breed when he became a cable car man. His book tells as much about him as it does about cable cars. It cannot be



Clinging to brass handrails and standing on running boards, car riders pack all available space as cable car reaches top of high hill with view of Alcatraz (left). Cars have seating for 30 but often up to 90 jam cars (above).



Now movie producer, author and actor, Melvin Van Peebles was cable car grip man and wrote book, "The Big Heart" about cable cars 15 years ago. After getting fired, he was watching film in Fillmore district and said to himself, "I can do better than that," then began making his first films which eventually led to his production of his movie "Sweetback."

Grip man Van Peebles seen as 'extraordinary man'

truly said that Van Peebles wrote the book because most of it is photographs taken by someone else. But he conceived the book, produced it, and supplied the text that accompanied the photos. It was a brash enterprise for a black man of 25, fresh out of the Air Force and working as a gripman on the cable cars. In his imagination he saw a book and he did not even know a photographer who would help him make it. One day in his neighborhood park, Alta Plaza, situated in a zone between the Fillmore ghetto and aristocratic Pacific Heights, he came upon a woman with paints, brushes and canvas. He asked the painter if she knew a photographer who might work with him. No, said the painter, but there was a distinguished photographer named Ruth Bernhard in the vicinity, who might recommend one.

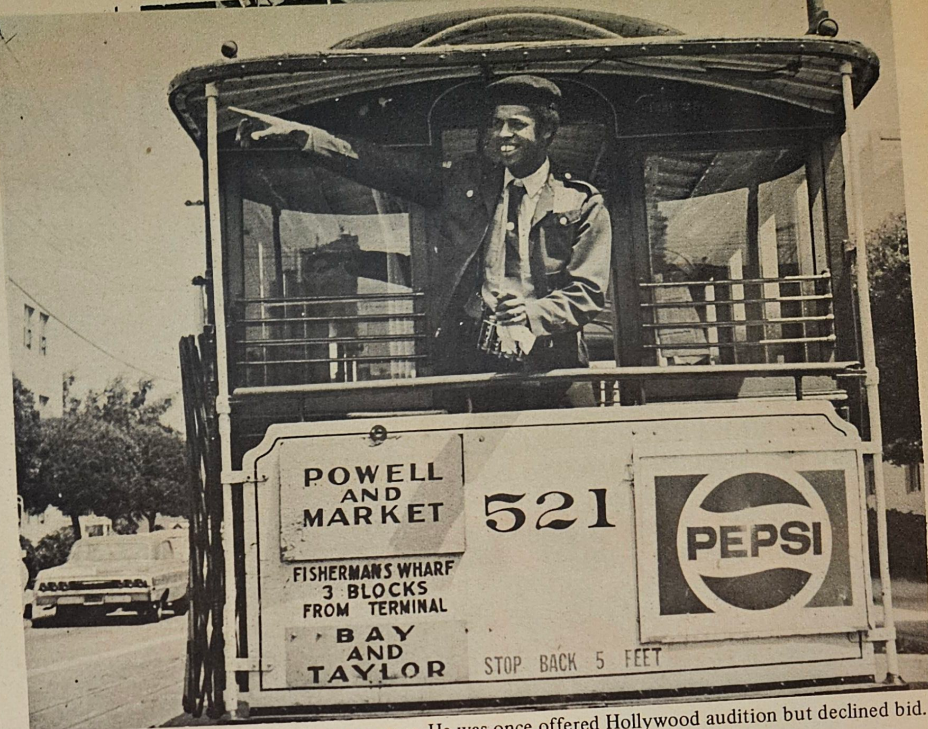
Miss Bernhard recalls the phone call from Van Peebles. He had this idea and it just happened that he was cooking up some southern fried chicken. Would she care to come up to

eat some chicken and talk about the idea? She went. The next morning Van Peebles rang her doorbell at 4 a.m. And so began "a natural and beautiful collaboration" that extended over four months of very concentrated work. She shot between 400 and 500 photos. The result, she says with rare objectivity, was a mediocre book. Even if it were better, at \$3.50 per copy it was priced too high for the tourist trade. It did not do well. As best as she can remember all she got for her four months work and more than 400 photos was about \$200. And she still does not know how Van Peebles managed to get it published by Fearon Publishers.

Yet she talks of the collaboration with great enthusiasm: "He is an extraordinary man and it was a great experience to work with him. He enjoyed himself in everything he ever did. He had an extraordinary capacity for fun, for life. It was a joy to be on his cable car."

She was also enthusiastic about his conception of the book.

Book causes Van Peebles to lose job



Top showman on cable car system is Fay Royal Baxter, who has running line of patter for passengers. He was once offered Hollywood audition but declined bid.

He did not want pretty or arty photographs. He wanted "pictures like a cable car man would take." It was not simply a matter of establishing authenticity through calculated amateurishness. He wanted the camera to see things as a cable car operator saw them.

The book cost Van Peebles his job. He was fired when it was published and he promptly sued, charging discrimination. "My record showed that I had never been late or absent," he recalls. "They said I was psychologically set to have a big accident. I went to the FEPC. They said, did anybody call you a nigger? I said no. Well, how can you call that discrimination? I looked up the firing rate at the company. It was 16 blacks to one white — for incompetence. That experience taught me that a man has the possibility of juggling statistics as he needs them."

In Van Peebles' creative career the book was a milestone. And not only because it was his first marketed creation, to be followed by four novels, three full-length films, and two Broadway musical shows, with more still to come. It was also a learning experience in the film medium. True, the book consisted of still pictures, as against the moving pictures he later directed, and yet many of the stills captured things in motion. For the future film maker it must have been a useful experiment in achieving fluidity and unity by stringing together the single frames caught in a camera's eye.

But what does the book say about his blackness? The most striking photo is of him, ostensibly taken just when he completed his training. The text says, "Finally one day you're on your own and you're as proud as the captain of a new luxury liner." That's what the picture says, too.

One reason behind the pride is suggested by Samuel A. McDaniel, the man who was Van Peebles' instructor. Now 54 and a gripman since 1947, McDaniel is referred to by some of the younger men as Mr. Cable Car. To understand what McDaniel says about Van Peebles you have to know something about a grip and the operation of a cable car.

The principle is simple. The car is towed by a moving cable 18 inches below the street surface. The grip is a metal claw that attaches the car to the cable. It is manipulated by the gripman through a series of levers that either tighten or loosen the grip's hold on the moving cable. Depending on whether

you are starting or stopping, accelerating or slowing down, you tighten or loosen the grip, so that you are constantly working the levers. "Pulling on the levers," a gripman explained, "is like lifting 125-pound sacks of sand all day long."

Every gripman remembers his breaking-in period as a physical horror, an excruciating ache of muscles. McDaniel, for instance, was physically tough and fresh out of the Marines when he broke in. Still his arm and shoulder muscles were so sore he couldn't even put his hands in his back pockets. For Van Peebles it was even rougher than for some others. "Van Peebles had very small hands," McDaniel recalls. "His hands got all cut up, bruised, blistered. They were raw. The average guy, when his hands take a beating like that, gives it up. He didn't. I admired him very much."

Maybe the experience with the hands prompted McDaniel's reply when asked whether his one-time pupil's triumph in show business surprised him. "No, I was not really surprised. He told us that this is what he intended to do. I thought he could do it. He was very determined."

In his book Van Peebles did not write about his ambition. "All in all I like cable cars," he wrote. "I like being a gripman. I'll stay."

He didn't stay, of course. In a money-minded country, people will say it was only natural for a man to leave a job that then paid \$2.24 an hour when he had the gift to make "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song," which grossed more than \$11 million on a \$500,000 production investment, ranked as the country's top money-making film for a couple of weeks early in 1971, and is probably the most lucrative independent production in U.S. film history. Since Van Peebles produced, directed, played the star role, and raised the bankroll (with an assist from Bill Cosby and other friends), presumably the lion's share of the gross went to him. But that's only money. The man had a calling and although Van Peebles strove for excellence as a gripman, according to McDaniel, his soul was somewhere else.

Van Peebles' story might be titled "A Cable Car Named Success." The story is different for the black men who still pilot those little cars up and down San Francisco's hills. And yet they, too, are caught up in the cable car mystique that gripped Van Peebles, and it is surprising how many get